

# Draft-Dodging Season

## Spring Is Time of Soviet Army Conscription; This Year, Thousands Are Refusing to Serve

---

By Michael Dobbs  
Washington Post Foreign Service

---

RIGA, U.S.S.R.—Oskars Zalans strolled past a red banner declaring that "Military service is the duty of every Soviet citizen" and dumped 113 Soviet army draft cards on the desk of Latvia's assistant military commissar.

"The Soviet Union occupied Latvia by force in 1940. Under the terms of the 1949 Geneva convention, which was ratified by the Soviet Union in 1954, Latvians can refuse to serve in the army of an occupying power," said Zalans, a member of Geneva '49, a group that has been organizing a massive boycott of the annual spring draft throughout the Baltic republics.

The Soviet army colonel looked at the package of draft cards as if it would explode. His face turned several shades of purple. He rushed off to consult his superior and came back with a prosecutor's letter declaring Geneva '49 a proscribed organization. Then he called the police.

Such confrontations are becoming a frequent occurrence in many of the Soviet Union's outlying republics as the spring conscription campaign gets underway in earnest. Every year, in the spring and fall, more than a million 18-year-old males are drafted into the Soviet army. But this year, tens of thousands are refusing to serve their compulsory two-year term not only for political reasons, but as evidence grows of hazing, and deaths, of conscripts.

The standoff in the offices of the Latvian military commissar ended after a sheepish police officer finally showed up to listen to the colonel's complaint and note down the names of the Geneva '49 representatives. For the past year, the Latvian civilian authorities have been reluctant to prosecute draft dodgers, despite mounting complaints by Soviet military authorities that law-breaking is going unpunished.

Draft evasion has reached mass

See DRAFT, A33, Col. 1

proportions in the three Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, all of which have embarked on the road to full independence from the Soviet Union. But anti-military sentiment is also growing in the southern Transcaucasian republics and even parts of Central Asia, a region regarded as politically docile until a few months ago.

"The Soviet empire is dying," exulted Edvardas Kriscuinas, a former Lithuanian lieutenant in the Soviet army who tore up his service card last year. "The Soviets are now obliged to put all their resources into saving the economy. If they had the strength, they would throw us all into jail. But they don't have the strength. The struggle for independence begins by boycotting the draft."

The anti-draft movement is a potentially explosive issue for a military, estimated by the International Institute for Strategic Studies to number about 4.2 million members, that relies on conscripts for about two-thirds of its manpower. It is also a major psychological blow to Soviet generals who have been reared on the assumption that universal military service plays a vital role in ensuring the political cohesion of a vast multinational state.

The chief of the general staff, Gen. Mikhail Moiseyev, said in a recent interview that the number of draft dodgers was eight times greater last year than in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. He told the Communist Party daily Pravda that local military commissars and the Defense Ministry could no longer enforce the draft regulations without the cooperation of local authorities.

The results of the present spring draft campaign have not yet been announced, but preliminary signs suggest that the number of draft dodgers will increase substantially from last year's official figure of 6,647. Geneva '49 estimates that at least 70 percent of Baltic conscripts are avoiding the draft, either by signing declarations refusing to serve in the army of an "occupying power" or by feigning sickness.

Political motivations and mounting evidence of physical attacks on conscripts in the Soviet army have contributed to the increase in draft evasion. Baltic conscripts, in par-

ticular, complain that they are being singled out for beatings, rape and other abuses by gangs of Russian and Central Asian soldiers.

"It is better to sit in jail than to serve in the Soviet army," said Algimantas Baiaras, a 20-year-old

*"We are fighting for the right to allow parents the right to open the coffins. The army usually tries to hand the coffin over to the family only moments before burial. Up until recently, people were afraid to ask questions."*

— Andra Balina,  
Latvian Women's League

Lithuanian who deserted last October and has been on the run ever since. He claimed that, during his three months in the army, three of his fellow conscripts died because of physical mistreatment by officers or fellow soldiers.

While the Latvian parliament was debating its independence declara-



tion this week, members of the Latvian Women's League held a silent demonstration outside the building, holding aloft portraits of 21 soldiers from Latvia who died in mysterious circumstances over the past 16 months. Many of the deaths were described as "suicides" by the military authorities.

A typical case was that of 19-year-old Viktors Karpovics, whose body was shipped home in a sealed coffin from his military unit in the Urals last March. The army claimed that he had accidentally shot himself, but an autopsy in Riga found several bullet wounds.

"We are fighting for the right to allow parents the right to open the coffins. The army usually tries to hand the coffin over to the family only moments before burial. Up until recently, people were afraid to ask questions," said Andra Balina, a member of the women's league.

In other, more populous Soviet republics, the number of conscripts returning home in coffins is proportionately greater. The unexplained deaths of young servicemen have become a particularly emotional issue in the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan which, because of its high birth rate, is supplying a disproportionate number of recruits to the army.

A funeral for a young conscript in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, last month turned into a public demonstration against conscription. The soldier, Bakhtir Karimov, was hanged in a military unit in the Moscow region. Opposition groups in Uzbekistan are calling for young Uzbeks to be allowed to perform their military service closer to home.

Complaints of discrimination and intimidation prompted the legislature of the southern republic of Armenia to suspend the spring draft earlier this week following massive demonstrations in the capital, Yerevan. Armenian activists claim that about 40 Armenians have been killed over the past two years.

Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov has acknowledged that there is a major problem of hazing in the Soviet army, compounded by growing nationalist tensions. But he and other senior generals are firmly resisting demands for the formation of ethnically homogeneous units or the transformation of the army into a volunteer force.

After the Lithuanian parliament declared independence March 11, about 1,500 Lithuanian soldiers deserted. Hundreds of them have since been captured or have returned to their units out of fear of court-martial. But an estimated 500 deserters are still believed to be in hiding.

In an attempt to prevent an open conflict with the military, legislatures in some republics are pushing through new laws that will allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative forms of community service. But such a compromise does not satisfy members of groups such as Geneva '49, which objects to service in the Soviet army for primarily political reasons.

"I'm not a pacifist," objected Zalans, when the military commissar asked him if he had looked into the possibility of alternative service. "I just don't want to serve in the army of an occupying power. I want to serve in the Latvian army."

## The Arrest of a Soviet Army Deserter

*Following is an excerpt from a letter to a friend from one of 21 Lithuanian deserters who were seized by Soviet paratroopers on the night of March 27-28 after they had taken refuge at a hospital in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. The name of the soldier has been withheld:*

"The Red Army came to arrest us at the psychiatry hospital at 4 a.m. on the night of March 27-28. I heard a noise. I went to the door, looked through the keyhole and saw very many soldiers. I wanted to flee but they smashed the door down. They hit me in the head with an automatic rifle and I lost consciousness.

"The next day, I woke up with a pain in the head

and handcuffs around my hands. I found out that there was not a single person in our group who had not been beaten. I had my nose broken. Two of my friends had their ribs smashed in. They took us to a first aid post so that they could photograph us. Then a general came and said we would be pardoned as we had surrendered voluntarily.

"[The Soviet government newspaper] Izvestia said the blood in the ward was caused by a broken window. That's not true. Don't believe it. Now we have all been sent to different units. I serve in a place where the temperature is minus 12 degrees. There are no roads. I am closer to America than to Lithuania."